

Bangor Daily News

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Editorial

C. Everett Koop

He will go down in history as the man who set the goal of a "smokeless society by the year 2000." He has been a courageous warrior against AIDS, the Reagan appointee who surprised liberals with his commitment to public health, a man who struck a balance between anti-abortionists and those who support freedom of choice.

Seventy-two-year-old Dr. C. Everett Koop, surgeon general of the United States since 1981, will step down July 13 to take up media work in the health field. Koop will be missed; perhaps downright irreplaceable. In an era of dissembling bureaucrats and greedy elected officials, the controversial, charismatic pediatrician set a tone of frankness for public officials. For this he sometimes paid the price of withering political assault including bombardment from the tobacco lobby, and the acrimonious charge from Phyllis Schlafly that, in advising homosexuals to use condoms to avoid AIDS, Koop was advocating "safe sodomy."

Koop's aggressiveness can be appreciated even more in 1989 when contrasted with recent revelations about the administration bureaucrats who attempted to alter scientific testimony before Congress to make it more in conformity with budget policy.

How quickly the public-health ground pioneered by Koop came to be taken for granted in America. Just consider some of the most recent declarations Koop issued from his pulpit as the nation's chief public health officer:

- On May 16, 1988, Koop declared that cigarettes and other tobacco products were addictive in a way comparable to the addictiveness of "drugs such as heroin and cocaine." The report was hailed by antismoking forces but denounced by the Tobacco Institute, the tobacco industry

mouthpiece, as a trivializing of the national drug problem. But Koop hammered away, calling for stronger warnings on cigarette packages, seeking to ban cigarette vending machines and urging insurance companies to fund programs to help smokers quit.

- Koop directed the preparation of the blunt booklet on AIDS that was mailed to millions of American homes in May 1988.

- On Jan. 27, 1988, as a means of gauging the spread of AIDS, he proposed a day of testing the entire student body of a major university in an urban area. The proposal was controversial, but just last month, researchers reported that college students were testing positive for AIDS more frequently than expected. (It was the first attempt to determine the extent of AIDS infection of college students.)

As recently as last week, in what he called his last news conference as surgeon general, Koop did not let up. Calling for voluntary restrictions on some alcoholic-beverage advertising practices, extension of the law including warning labels on alcoholic-beverage containers, and increased taxes on alcohol, he again generated the lively debate that has characterized his terms of service.

Flip through any magazine. Those famous messages from the surgeon general, highlighted in a rectangular box at the bottom of the cigarette ads, jump off the page to catch the eye: "Quitting smoking now greatly reduces serious risks to your health." "Smoking by pregnant women may result in fetal injury, premature birth, and low birth weight."

Thank you, Dr. Koop, for your accomplishments as the official protector of America's health.